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SUBJECT: SAUDI-PROPOSED UNGA SPECIAL SESSION ON RELIGION

REF: USUN 555

¶1. (U) Action request: In response to reftel request by the SYG for U.S. views on a possible UNGA Special Session on the political and religious components of interfaith dialogue, USUN should seek to signal encouragement of interfaith dialogue and seek details of the make-up, agenda items, and focus of the Saudi-proposed Special Session on religion. USUN should communicate that while the United States strongly supports interfaith dialogue, we believe such a dialogue should be broadly inclusive, apolitical, and focused on common values shared by faiths. The United States would not support a special session that seeks to exclude any religious or national groups, seeks to air political grievances, or seeks to enact measures against free speech under the guise of limiting religious defamation. USUN should urge the SYG to postpone making a final decision until after the July 16-18 Interfaith Dialogue Conference in Spain and further consultation with the United States and other Member States. USUN should draw on the talking points and questions in paragraphs 2 and 3 below.

¶2. (U) Talking Points:

-- The United States welcomes interfaith dialogue and generally supports Saudi efforts to acknowledge shared values between Islam and other religions throughout the world.

-- For such a dialogue to be effective it would need to focus on common values shared by faiths and not become a forum for political grievances.

-- We will be watching closely the July 16-18 Interfaith Dialogue Conference in Spain, which is also part of the Saudi effort to promote interfaith dialogue. This conference will provide us with further context for assessing the value of the Saudi proposal for an UNGA Special Session.

-- The U.S. has concerns, however, about the extent to which an UNGA Special Session on the "political and religious components of interfaith dialogue" would be constructive at this time.

-- Our memory of the Durban Conference is vivid, and we are concerned that without careful planning and consideration a UN-hosted interfaith dialogue conference could degenerate into a similar dynamic, embarrassing the United Nations and individual member states and doing nothing to further mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding.

-- For any event to have a positive result, it should be fully inclusive of all faiths. The U.S. is concerned that some may attempt to exclude from the event members of certain religions, including subgroups and offshoots.

-- We are concerned, additionally, that the meeting could be used as a platform for promoting the concept of "Defamation of Religions," which the U.S. strongly opposes because of its implications for restrictions on freedom of religion and expression, as well as for the individual versus collective rights of members of one religious group.

13. (U) Questions for use with the SYG or Secretariat staff:

-- Would the format of this event be an UNGA Special Session in which all UN Member States and UN Observers would be able to participate, or would there be a different format in which others, such as representatives of religious groups and NGOs, would also speak?

-- If the latter, would all faiths be included, including those the Saudi government views as polytheistic (e.g., those other than Islam, Judaism, and Christianity)? Further, within each religion, would all religious groups be welcome, including subgroups and offshoots (e.g. Bahais, Ahmadiyyas, converts to religions irrespective of their original and new faiths)?

-- Also, if the format is other than an UNGA Special Session, would the event be sponsored by the UN? What UN resources would be expended on it? Would the Saudis be willing to follow the format of the 2004 Secretary-General Seminars on "Unlearning Intolerance" that focused on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and were open to the public?

-- How would staffing for this work? UN personnel?

-- Also, if this is not an UNGA Special Session, who would make the decision on whom to invite? Are there any thoughts at this time about whom to invite? Will national delegations be invited or simply religious leaders from a range of states that do not necessarily speak on behalf of their governments?

-- What are the views of other member states? Is there sufficient member state support for convening a Special Session?

-- Will the conference address the role of textbooks and other media in promoting or retarding the goal of tolerance?

-- What mechanisms and procedures could be used to ensure that the discussion does not advocate for limitations on freedom of speech and the press in the name of "defending religion"?

-- Are the Saudis open to holding the event after UNGA? Would the Saudis be prepared to allow NGOs or other governments to participate in organizing and planning of the conference?  
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